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Gritz says he lacks proof about POWs

Evidence not 'hard, firm'

From Wire Services

Washington — James (Bo) Gritz, the retired Green Beret colonel arrested after a fruitless effort to free American prisoners of war, he says are in Southeast Asia, told Congress yesterday that he doesn't have any "hard, firm" evidence to support his claim that at least 50 Americans are being held.

"I don't have a rabbit I could pull out of a hat" to prove that there are any POWs, Mr. Gritz said in answer to questions from the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Asian and Pacific affairs.

Nevertheless, he said, information gleaned by his team during "Operation Lazarus," the privately financed raid he led last month, convinced him that "at least 50" Americans were still being held in Laos.

The Pentagon sharply disputed this, telling the subcommittee that by embarking on a private mission, Mr. Gritz had harmed official efforts to account for Americans still missing 10 years after U.S. combat troops pulled out of Indochina.

In answer to several questions from committee members, Mr. Gritz said he had "important new evidence" that he had refused to turn over to U.S. intelligence agencies because he didn't think it would be taken seriously.

Five separate Laotian "sources" gave his group evidence that Americans prisoners are being held there, Mr. Gritz said.

"I have concrete evidence, as I see it, that at least 50 Americans" are being held, he said. The Pentagon has information on 200 to 250 Americans, he added.

Mr. Gritz promised to turn over his evidence to the committee, but

later conceded that it basically consisted of reports from his Laotian associates and was not of a "documentary" nature.

"I have the same evidence that might be presented to a convention of clergymen that God exists," he said.

He said Operation Lazarus was compromised by an American who defected from the operation and told the press about it while Mr. Gritz and his team were in Laos, en route to a Communist outpost where he thought about 10 Americans were being held.

When Mr. Gritz returned to California after the raid, he said photographs taken by a Laotian working with his group would show a POW camp.

He said that when he looks at the pictures now, however, he finds "nothing there that would provide any usable evidence." He did not bring the pictures but promised to give them to the committee.

Adm. Allan Paulson, of the Defense Intelligence Agency, told the committee that the Laotian national who was Mr. Gritz's chief intelligence source on American prisoners was unreliable.

"That individual has been polygraphed [given lie detector tests] twice by us in December of last year and 11 months before, in both cases indicating complete deception," Admiral Paulson said.

The admiral said Mr. Gritz, who served in the Army Special Forces during the Vietnam War, was a "brave and capable soldier," but sharply questioned his methods.

Mr. Gritz said, as he has before, that the U.S. government knew about and supported his efforts. During his foray into Laos, he said, "messages to me indicated positive support" from the government.

Pentagon and State Department officials, however, denied yesterday that they had supported Mr. Gritz's mission.

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